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## **Populism and Empire**

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## Populism and 'Empire': the impossibility of sovereignty

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At some point in *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri reflect on the possibility of a concrete political alternative to Empire. The authors refuse that such an effective blueprint can emerge from theory and argue that it will instead emerge from practice. Indeed, they claim that as well as “Marx needed the Paris Commune in order to make the leap and conceive communism in concrete terms as an effective alternative to capitalist society” (2000: 206), comparable experiments are necessary to become more concrete and think of an existing alternative beyond Empire. Although intertwined, a gap to be filled is open between theory and practice. *Empire* represents an ambitious conceptualization of the global modes of production and governance which introduce new mechanisms of domination beyond the nation-state. Whilst Hardt and Negri call for overcoming many debates within the left (on rejecting the adequacy of theories on modernity, imperialism or postcolonialism), their conceptualization of the new form of global governance contrasts with the limited elaboration of a theory and a praxis of the counter- Empire. However, the

of Hardt and Negri has entered into dialogue with emerging alternatives to Empire, and their theoretical reflections echo the initiatives and practices of social movements. The path of the “becoming-Prince” of the multitude has been portrayed differently from the nomadic alter-globalization movement and the tactics of counter-summits in *Empire* (2000) to *Multitude* (2004) where the peace movement was already replacing the alter-globalization one. The progressive governments in Latin America were the object of the conceptualization of *Global* (2006) by Antonio Negri and Giuseppe Cocco. Commonwealth came closest to the formulation of a political project in which the common (and its institutions) played a central role. But, if something is comparable with the Paris Commune at a global scale it is the cycle of social protests initiated in 2011. *Declaration* (2012) was a quick response to that and *Assembly* (2017) a later one. Rather than a disruption, the new cycle enables Hardt and Negri to deepen an alternative to state sovereignty and political representation in the form of constituent exodus by the creation of stateless or non-sovereign institutions.

The intellectual project instigated by *Empire* 20 years ago is still a refreshing combination of theoretical and practice-based knowledge, combined with a renewed dose of optimism, to account for global dominance and resistance. In a similar way that Negri and Hardt have rejected other theories about progressive emancipatory political and social projects, other authors have rejected drastically the premises and framework of *Empire*. This is the case of Ernesto Laclau (2008) who, in his critique of *Empire*, rejects the immanence of the multitude as a central category to think Empire and the multitude and concludes that politics are unthinkable within such a framework. This is not totally surprising, taking into consideration that Hardt and Negri express their disagreement with Laclau due to his transcendent rather than immanent approach. In political terms, the differences can be traced along the debate between taking the power or not, particularly intense in the Latin American context, and reflected theoretically in divergent positions: one year after the publication of *Multitude*, Laclau published *On Populist Reason*. The political conjuncture revitalized the debate after the 2011 protests and the later emergence of left-wing parties adopting a left-wing strategy in Europe. In this case, Mouffe's book *For a Left Populism* (2018), published one year after *Assembly*, highlighted the discrepancies. It must be said that Hardt and Negri, despite not sharing

their premises, sympathized with these progressive political processes, first in Latin America and later in Europe. However, similar dichotomies have been repeated: unity vs. plurality, autonomy vs. hegemony, horizontal vs. vertical, movement vs. party, Empire (or globalization) vs. nation-state, etc. Besides reaffirming pre-existing perspectives, the discussion can hardly be characterized as a productive dialogue. Therefore, I would like to consider some of the main contributions made by Hardt and Negri to rethinking the shortcomings (and potentials?) of populism. This is not the same as saying that Hardt and Negri would support any kind of populist conceptualization, because they would not, but rather that some of their points can be useful to reflect on the role of the political left and, more specifically, on the recent development of left-wing populism.

### Globalization and the State

Since Hardt and Negri moved the political field to Empire and claimed a new sovereignty, the imperial sovereignty, there is only one way to combat efficiently towards Empire: globally. This is, indeed, an interesting starting point since the roots of inequality and dominance are considered to be global, which can be quite similar to the claims of populism, but, in contrast, state sovereignty is not the solution to fight against globalization. The organization of resistance, the counter-Empire, should

be global. Although the focus on the global is qualified with increasing local attention, the national arena is not an arena for social and political struggles. Whilst populist theory fails to connect scales beyond the national (the transnational is used to point to the enemy rather than to articulate a common subject), Hardt and Negri disregard it and acknowledge the global as the only valid alternative to Empire and the local as the space of the (re)production of the common. Therefore, the only options which can be considered real alternatives or resistance to Empire are those which are connected to the global scale and not limited to other scales. In other words, even the defense of autonomy as a local project must be linked to the resistance against Empire:

*We believe that toward the end of challenging and resisting Empire and its world market, it is necessary to pose any alternative at an equally global level. Any proposition of a particular community in isolation, defined in racial, religious, or regional terms, "delinked" from Empire, shielded from its powers by fixed boundaries, is destined to end up as a kind of ghetto. Empire cannot be resisted by a project aimed at a limited, local autonomy. We cannot move back to any previous social form, nor move forward in isolation. Rather, we must push through Empire to come out the other side (2000: 206).*

In the 00s, the position of Hardt and Negri was already controversial within the left. The global as battlefield

implied relegating the national scale to a second place, and together with that the aspiration to take power or the predominance of political actors. The acceptance of the global scale as the only option to resist, and at some undetermined moment to overcome it, cannot be detached from the insufficiency of taking power of national government as an efficient strategy to defeat Empire. In times when the alter-globalization movement was being shaped, the internal debates showed division around how to address globalization: trying to recover state sovereignty or forging a global alternative. Hardt and Negri were obviously in favor of the latter and were already critical towards individualized leadership, the return to the state and taking power. In the aftermath of the protests of 2011, Hardt and Negri reiterated their position and, particularly with the emergence of left-wing populist parties in Europe, continued their rejection of the state-oriented strategy. Populism can only be reactive. This does not mean that left-wing populism cannot produce positive changes and transform people's lives for good. However, it is limited how much it can reach, since it is not offering an alternative to Empire. It is not reactive in the same way as right-wing populism, but still maintains the illusion of solving the global challenges by recovering state control.

Hardt and Negri showed indeed an early understanding of the divide between winners and losers of

globalizations that would characterize the discourses of right-wing populism. In their usual provocative style, Hardt and Negri notice the geographical distribution of global hierarchy in relation to the opposition between postmodernists and fundamentalists. Postmodernists perceive mobility, indeterminacy and hybridity as liberation, whilst fundamentalists see it as exacerbation of their suffering. Fundamentalism includes right-wing nationalist-populist parties like Front National, Christian fundamentalists in the US and the Islamic Brothers. The scope and means of the examples are quite disparate and this weakens the explanation of right-wing populism as a contemporary phenomenon, not related to other types of extremisms. It reminds us of the distinction made by Manuel Castells (2004) between reactive and proactive social movements when he exemplifies the former with the Zapatistas, the American militia, Aum Shinrikyo and Al-Qaeda. These groups, as insurgents against the global order, have a resistance identity and are stigmatized by the logic of domination. Their main common feature is that they are identity-based mobilizations. The global framework entails here a major simplification of the nature and struggles of the selected examples, but like Hardt and Negri, Castells considers that these groups are not capable of assuming globalization as the new order. However, Hardt and Negri offer a primarily economic explanation (the transformations of the global economy

and the mobility of capital) rather than an identitarian one as proposed by Castells. The losers of globalization are “the strongest indication of the transformation in progress” (2000: 150). Furthermore, Hardt and Negri refer to the winners of globalization to highlight the need of an alternative globalization without deriving into the return of the state. Antagonism happens at the global scale at two levels: against those who take advantage of globalization and against those who reclaim the national level.

I would like to emphasize that the divide between winners and losers of globalization anticipated the idea of “progressive neoliberalism”, utilized by Nancy Fraser, to explain the victory of Trump not only as a revolt against global finance. To Fraser, progressive neoliberalism is “an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights), on the one side, and high-end ‘symbolic’ and service-based business sectors (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood), on the other” (2017). The combination of progressive forces and the forces of cognitive capitalism meant that values such as diversity and empowerment were appropriated by capitalism to serve profitable goals far from any emancipatory project. Hardt and Negri express that convergence more brutally by claiming that postmodernist theories pave the way for the transformation of the internal structures of capitalist organizations (2000: 153), since organizations

nowadays must be mobile, flexible and able to deal with difference. Thus, big companies seem both progressive and postmodern. The existence of winners of globalization, rooted in postmodernism, is useful to explain the populist reaction against progressive neoliberalism or the neoliberal elites. However, it should not be forgotten that Hardt and Negri see this dynamic as the indicator of the transformation to Empire. Thus, one group is enjoying the advantages of globalization and the other one feels excluded and marginalized, but none of them is the solution: neither the apparent progressivism coming from postmodern elites nor the retreat to state by populism.

The rejection of the dichotomy between inside and outside and the claim that there is no outside Empire are, indeed, the main obstacles to making the return to the state the priority of a progressive and emancipatory project. I would say that this is the principal reason for the distancing from left-wing populism or any alternative relying on the attempt to recover state sovereignty. Besides the differences between 'the people' and multitude, populism, following Hardt and Negri's reasoning, is not capable of redefining other spaces than the nation. This idea is clear when they show how the alternative conception of sovereignty runs up against the idea that the nation was no longer a space to expand sovereignty, overcoming barriers and boundaries to facilitate equality and free circulation. Here the

conception of 'the people' deployed by Hardt and Negri does not fall away from the one of populist theory. 'The people' is created and detached from the nation: "The new democracy had to destroy the transcendental idea of the nation with all its racial divisions and create its own people, defined not by old heritages but by a new ethics of the construction and expansion of the community" (2000: 172). The difference is, obviously, that the expansion is immanent and originates in the exodus of the multitude and that the resulting space (or non-space) is the one of the Empire (not the nation). Nonetheless, the construction of 'the people' through means distinctive from heritage (connected with nationalism), unified in a plural community, is quite interesting to explore. The lack of a transnational dimension is, without any doubt, one of the major challenges in forging an alternative to globalization. The retreat to national sovereignty (in the form of popular sovereignty) makes such a transnational expansion difficult. That said, both the perspectives of Hardt and Negri and of populism are needed to reconsider multi-scalar politics. The displacement to Empire cannot ignore the centrality of the national scale to articulate local and global resistances. It is quite unclear that accelerating the dismantling of nation-states is going to lead to a new phase of Empire without nation-states. On the other hand, focusing on the importance of the states is not going to offer complete solutions to the global dynamics. No wonder both strategies

face severe problems to be translated into durable and consistent processes of social and political change.

## Multitude and the People

Probably the most obvious difference between Hardt and Negri's and the populist approaches relies on the subject of change: the multitude or the people. The starting point is quite similar according to Hardt and Negri (2017): the recognition of the heterogeneity of the social field and the consequent impossibility of unifying all the subjectivities in one single subject or struggle. The commonalities, in principle, end here. According to the authors of *Empire*, Laclau rejects the immanence and the possibility of the multiplicity of social subjectivities organizing themselves and creating lasting institutions. Instead, Laclau would promote the terrain of transcendence through hegemony as the form of organizing the multiple social subjectivities into the empty signifier 'the people'. The disagreement consists of organizing a unified subject from above (transcendence) or organizing social subjectivities themselves as a multitude (immanence). Complementarily, hegemony is the operation to impose unity into multiplicity, and autonomy becomes the expression of the plurality of subjectivities and the institutions they create. The opposition between multitude and 'the people' continues to accumulate dichotomies (immanence vs. transcendence, multiplicity vs. unity,

autonomy vs. hegemony) and other ones could be added such as expression vs. representation. The conclusion is that Laclau's intellectual project is elaborated within the framework of modern sovereignty and is not capable of offering a satisfactory project to deal with the times of Imperial sovereignty. The initial recognition of a common assumption (the heterogeneity of the social field) turns merely anecdotal, given that both are presented in opposing terms and the space for dialogue is almost inexistent. The series of incompatible dichotomies presents two very different projects, despite the fact that social and political practices prove the fluidity and interconnection between the actors who participate in autonomy or hegemonic operations or, in other words, who aspire to implement the institutions of the common and sympathize and participate in left-wing populist strategies oriented towards taking power. This does not mean that the interconnection is not fraught with contradictions but, at least, there are spaces to confront and maybe settle such contradictions.

In a similar way to Hardt and Negri, Paolo Virno elaborates a clear distinction between multitude and people in his book *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004). Virno shows disposition to recover the use of multitude since people has been the prevailing one. The two polarities are attributed to Spinoza and Hobbes as putative fathers. For Spinoza the *multitudo* is a plurality which persists as

such without converging into a One and is the architrave of civil liberties. Hobbes, in Virno's words, detests the multitude for being perceived as a danger to the State as monopoly of political decision-making, so the most determining political clash is the one between multitude and people. The multitude, 'the many', preceded the State which is established through the endowment of a single will, incarnated by the unity of people. Thus, the concept of people is "strictly correlated to the existence of the State; furthermore, it is a reverberation, a reflection of the State: if there is a State, then there are people. In the absence of the State, there are no people" (Virno, 2004: 22). The multitude, adds Virno to Hobbes' interpretation, resists unity and authority because it never transfers its 'state of nature' to the sovereign (in opposition to people). In this way, multitude becomes a negative borderline concept (multitude as what people is not) which denies state sovereignty and the delegation of people's power to the sovereign (to represent and unify people's will). The terrain of multitude is clearly civil society and not the state, to which people belong.

Virno, in line with Hardt and Negri, places the multitude at the stateless level and people at the state. The idea that if there is no State, there are no people illustrates quite well, in my opinion, the difficulties experienced by populism to pursue a transnational populist project. The articulation of 'the

people' is still constrained to the state and sovereignty and it is quite complicated to imagine 'the people' beyond the state boundaries. However, the conception of people as political unity which transfers its power to the sovereign can be qualified or, directly, contested. Firstly, populism is namely bounded by the limits of the state but it has mainly been a reaction against the exclusionary state and its appropriation by the elites that utilize it to their own benefit. In other words, populism is also a sort of 'repressed experience' which returns to the state and reclaims its representation by announcing its exclusion. Reducing people to a category of domination obscures the potential of 'the people' as a category of resistance. In this regard, multitude and 'the people' share their rejection of current forms of representation but differ in their goal: since multitude refuses any kind of representation, 'the people' aims to improve existing forms of representation. In this process, the populist mobilizations, coming from the civil society arena, end up being articulated and becoming part of the political representation. Secondly and back to the initial point, there is certain confusion between equivalence and unity (or identity). It is commonplace that 'the people' is a homogenous group, where plurality is erased, through the unifying operation of the logic of equivalence. That can be the case and populism can evolve into a homogenous group, but the transversal dimension of populism points rather to the opposite: an inclusive appeal to the



articulation of 'the many' and their demands.

Chantal Mouffe insists on the importance of establishing a chain of equivalence; this means that "it is equivalence we are after, not identity" (2018). She is critical of Hardt and Negri's multitude because they expect an automatic convergence of the plurality of struggles (immanence). The commonality of the social struggles is that they share a common adversary. The operation of unifying is applied to forge a common agenda on the basis of their opposition to an adversary. The commonality is constructed in negative terms, against the adversary, and the plurality of groups, including internal disagreements, contradictions or tensions between them, persists. The chain of equivalence is neither a rainbow coalition nor a unified subject. Mouffe clarifies that the chain of equivalence "is not about uniting all demands into one single and homogeneous movement. This grouping of forces simply begins to see themselves in solidarity with one another and disadvantaged by the existing power structure. Each link in the chain remains distinct, but they begin to operate together, in concert" (2016). Following Mouffe's argument, the articulation of 'the people' is not incompatible with heterogeneity. The equivalence does not affect the particular and differentiated internal identities of the group. It should be noticed that the articulation of 'the people' is quite vulnerable since it depends on having a common

adversary. The tensions between movements and parties (some of them becoming part of the governments) can alter the chain of equivalence and unveil the fragility of 'the people'. This clearly happens when some parties start to be perceived by the movements as part of the establishment. It can also happen that left-wing parties or governments do not seem receptive to satisfying movements' demands, which can imply that those demands are articulated with the claims of other parties. The vulnerability is reduced if populism is understood merely as representation of the demands, particularly by a political leader. This is the case of many populist experiences where the plurality of movements does not play a major role and the role of the leader as unifier of demands prevails. The articulation of 'the people' relies then on the ability to define a lasting common adversary in order to have a common project and preserve the plurality within. In any case, the articulation around political leaders can unify the representation of the demands but also provoke internal disagreement and ruptures, not to mention that representation can be prioritized and blur the relevance of the movements in questioning the political system. If the latter were the case, we would be quite close to the marginalization of the multitude as singled out by Virno.

The notion of multitude raises doubts about the formation of an alternative against Empire. In a similar way to

Mouffe disclaiming the comparison between unity and equivalence, Hardt and Negri complain about the confusion between spontaneity and organization. Hardt and Negri consider that change will come from the potentials of existing forms of life and the emerging social struggles. This standpoint has been understood as change coming from the spontaneous struggles of the multitude. However, Hardt and Negri have emphasized the need to organize social struggles but refuse to articulate those struggles (which would imply an operation of transcendence). Although Hardt and Negri introduce the combination of horizontal and vertical axes and the constitution of the multitude as a construction of counterpowers, it is unclear how the alternative to Empire is constituted. The republican global program formulated in *Empire* surprised in being phrased as a sort of universal rights. The later emphasis on the institutions of the common and the organizing of capacities for social production and reproduction better reflected the alternative as forged by the multitude. The formation of a new Prince, constituted by counterpowers expressed by the multitude of producers and reproducers, will be responsible for initiating a process of constituent power. The moment in which the factors to initiate constituent power converge is, obviously, not specified, but it sounds a bit paradoxical that the new Prince is already conformed by the producers and reproducers of counterpowers

and, at the same time, the new Prince needs to produce counterpowers against the repressive power. The question about how organization works and elaborates an alternative to Empire remains open.

I want to finalize the reflection on 'the people' and multitude with a consideration regarding their uses. Multitude has barely become part of social movements (it was assumed by the autonomy movement principally during the alterglobalization) and its multiplicity is perceived as a weak strategy to achieve social and political goals. The problems derived by the attributed unity to 'the people' are of a different nature. But it is surprising that 'the people' is considered an empty signifier but multitude is not, although the pluralities of social struggles (or the constituent against the constituted) obtain their commonality by being named as multitude. 'The people' and multitude would in this case be categories pointing to different types of strategies and goals, which reflects the tensions between movements and parties, expression and participation, horizontality and verticality, rather than exclusionary dichotomies.

### **Sovereign and Non-sovereign**

Both discussing the scale (global or national) and the subject, the underlying question is how sovereignty is conceptualized. Hardt and Negri are categorical when they claim that Imperial sovereignty marks a paradigm shift that renders many theories and

political projects obsolete and insufficient. Power is no longer concentrated by the nation-states but decentralized. Hardt and Negri summarize briefly and quite clearly which distinctions mark the passage from modern to imperial sovereignty: “from the people to the multitude, from dialectical opposition to the management of hybridities, from the place of modern sovereignty to the non-place of Empire, from crisis to corruption” (2000: 202-203). In the following, I highlight how Hardt and Negri do not consider the return of the state or of modern sovereignty a desirable option (as a transition at its best) and how their option to counteract Imperial sovereignty consists of the foundation of non-sovereign institutions.

Modern sovereignty is an obstacle since the subject of change, the multitude, was excluded and its potential was replaced with people, a unified subject that gives the power to the sovereign (logic of transcendence). Imperial sovereignty as a global space (or non-space) without distinction between inside and outside enables the emergence of the multitude (the logic of immanence), as plurality not constrained by the borders of the nation-state. This is a complex scenario. On the one hand, Empire seems like a liberating force, in opposition to nation-states, and can easily be understood as a progressive move, but on the other hand, it is pertinent to remember that Empire is a system of domination (just at the

global scale and with the nation-states losing control). The impetus for moving to Empire and rejecting national sovereignty as a viable option creates a considerable distance between Hardt and Negri’s approach and other left-wing projects, including populism. It explains why, unfairly, the authors of *Empire* have been labeled global reformists and defenders of global capitalism. A second dimension must be added. It is not only modern sovereignty which is transcendent. Sovereignty in itself is defined by transcendence and representation. The politics of multitude cannot be successfully carried out under the umbrella of sovereignty, and representation cannot be the goal. The rejection of representative politics, as defining sovereignty, creates again a huge distance between the theory on Empire and other theories and political proposals. The only desirable option is to create non-sovereign institutions. In their claim for a new paradigm, Hardt and Negri fix strongly separated dichotomies between Empire vs. Imperialism, Imperial sovereignty vs. modern sovereignty, sovereignty vs. non-sovereignty and expression vs. representation. This framework makes it difficult to account for institutional claims by the multitude, the defense of popular sovereignty by movements and parties, the potentials (and limitations) of achieving state and local power or the formation of hybrid forms of representation and participation such as movement-parties. Without denying its necessity and potential,

the battlefield drawn by Hardt and Negri is quite unclear since it differs from other political projects by not aiming to take power or gain political representation. The multitude, not articulated and safeguarded from transcendence, would be meant for local struggles through organizing existing forms of production and reproduction.

The Pink Tide in Latin America offered, however, a more concrete image of the materialization of the resistance against Empire. Without sharing the means or the goals, Hardt and Negri sympathized with the Latin American progressive political processes, some of them labeled left-wing populism. In his participation in a dialogue about Bolivia, Negri (2008) referred to the situation, which could be expanded to other Latin American countries, as a passage of transition. The elements of transition are basically two: the shift from representation to expression, and from sovereignty to interdependence, although a third one could be added: from government to governance. The relation between representation (the government) and expression (the movements) is characterized by a constituent exodus, resulting in multitudes' resistance and claim to power (albeit a different power from the previous one), whose aim is to move beyond capitalism. In the same forum, Hardt considers too the 'Bolivian experiment' as a transition through a democratic openness (and not a dictatorship). Transition should "constitute a people, a multitude

capable of self-government; create a dynamic between government and social movements, and thus be able to transform the human nature in a more positive manner everyday" (Hardt et al., 2008: 54). Together with this process of democratic deepening, the passage from dependence to interdependence is explored by Cocco and Negri in GlobAL. As happens with other claims to return to modern sovereignty, the national-developmental strategy is rejected, and governing of interdependence is suggested as an alternative to both national-developmental and capitalist market-oriented interdependence generated by Empire. Cocco and Negri seem to apply the expansive nature of immanence to move from the national to the regional scale. This move provoked furious reactions from parts of the left since the reinforcement of national sovereignty is considered a legitimate strategy against imperialism and necessary for Latin American countries. It must be noted that the governments which were considered radical-left (Venezuela, Bolivia) defended the return of state sovereignty whilst the ones of center-left (Brazil, Uruguay) opted for major regional openness. As mentioned, the transition implies that, in the best case, we witness a passage to absolute democracy and multitude's self-organization. However, the openness in terms of conceiving government (as a mixed form of movements and party) and sovereignty (as interdependent and not necessarily

limited to nation-states) entails important elements to establish a serious dialogue with the complicated intersection between representation and participation as well as the national and international arenas to think of more complex ways of representative democracy and multi-scalar sovereignty.

Despite a similar situation taking place in Europe when Syriza took power in Greece and Podemos became the third most voted party in Spain, Hardt and Negri did not consider the option of 'transition' as an autonomous project; not even when municipalism gained force as a local institutional alternative. Hardt and Negri maintain that constituent power, at least as its end, is not compatible with representation and sovereignty, and they leave out any possible connection with populism due to their opposition to the people as political union: "Conceiving of constituent power as a swarm concept, as a multitudinous pluralism means breaking with every fetishistic conception of political union and thus critiquing the concepts of the people and the nation for the ways they have traditionally been posed as unities" (2007: 37). Abandoning sovereignty becomes a prerequisite for the multitude to leave behind the sovereign relationship of power and domination and the mandate for unity. Taking power does not mean then to reach the government but, for a multitude, to invent non-sovereign institutions. If modern sovereignty has been replaced by imperial sovereignty,

the constituent exodus consists, according to Hardt and Negri, of creating non-sovereign institutions grounded in practices and spaces of resistance. Their proposal relies on strengthening the connection between the social and the political, instead of conceiving them as two autonomous and separate arenas, to promote real democracy where a multitude self-organizes and makes political decisions, or, in more populist words, where 'the people' is capable of ruling itself collectively. The different goals of left-wing populism and Hardt and Negri's approach (popular sovereignty vs. non-sovereign institutions) accentuate their differences and reproduce the abovementioned dichotomies.

### **Multi-scalar and intersectional populism?**

Before concluding, I would like to return to the starting point and reflect upon how theories and studies on populism can benefit from the perspective of Empire (this question is likewise applicable to how to read Empire from a populist perspective). The main focus has been on differences and the projects thus seem almost incommensurable. I summarize in the following table some of the main differences (as it has been singled out in this article there are several others as well) which contribute to a dichotomist way of seeing both approaches. I have labeled Hardt and Negri's perspective *operaismo* (workerism), and left-wing populism

refers especially to its formulation by Laclau and Mouffe.

Table 1 (page 69)

As illustrated here, the two projects present considerable differences, although there are many more positions in-between than those framed as dichotomies. It is true that Hardt and Negri's proposal can be understood as a populism without sovereignty and representation. Following Rousseau, Hardt and Negri refer to the impossibility of political representation: However, the authors warn in *Assembly* that this claim does not lead to the defense of participation or direct democracy but to guaranteeing sovereignty through 'general will' as a form of representation. The general will becomes a unanimous political subject which represents all through the unifying effect of representation. On the contrary, the 'will of all' consists of organization of social cooperation and reproduction of social life without any representative mandate. In other words, sovereignty entails unity and is incompatible with plurality: "Whereas the will of all, because of its plurality, is inimical to sovereignty, the general will, unified and indivisible, is sovereign" (2017: 27). The populist version of Hardt and Negri would be that of the 'will of all' where multitude replaces 'the people' in order to preserve plurality. However, Imperial sovereignty should draw a more complex panorama where there are

coexisting and intertwined forms of sovereignty both geographically (local, regional, national, global) and in terms of power/resistance (from below, from above). Likewise, to avoid unity and promote plurality, forms of participation and direct action should be combined with representation, but also the composition of the political subject should be reconsidered. Therefore, I conclude with two main topics to rethink the scope of sovereignty (multi-scale) and the plurality of the political subject (intersectionality).

### **Multi-scalar**

Hardt and Negri chose Empire to name a new global power structure and a new form of sovereignty which does not correspond with a global state since its structure is decentralized. Although the use of Empire has not had a huge predicament, only within operaismo and not always, it grasps a period of definition of political and social struggles in which 'old' schemas cannot account for the 'new' reality. This is clear when Hardt and Negri claim that there is no longer an outside and they reject the inside vs. outside divide. Globalization is both "processes of homogenization and heterogenization. Rather than creating one smooth space, the emergence of Empire involves the proliferation of borders and hierarchies at every geographical scale, from the space of the single metropolis to that of the

great continents” (Hardt & Negri, 2020: 73). Furthermore, an understanding of globalization as a phenomenon from above would be insufficient without including the forces of globalization from below. I share indeed such a framework and consider that the populist focus on popular sovereignty has made transnational articulations difficult, and it reproduces the antagonist conflict at the global scale: globalization from above vs. globalization from below. Hardt and Negri replace the spatial metaphor inside vs. outside with the one between below vs. above. At this point, it would look like Hardt and Negri’s approach could be used, although they would disagree, to elaborate the notion of transnational populism. How to organize (and articulate) such a transnational populism in times of Imperial sovereignty remains uncertain. However, I would like to highlight that globalization, according to Hardt and Negri, is both homogenization and heterogenization, and that implies the emergence of new borders at every geographical scale. Despite there not being an outside, the construction of inside/outside oppositions continues to flourish, and the process of resistance (the globalization from below) is equally exposed to the tension between preserving its plurality and finding commonalities (without that implying unity). It is here that I see that populism entails potential to address some of the issues raised by *Empire*. Although being quite different in their nature and scope, ‘the people’

does not reproduce, as deductible from its opposition to multitude, the dichotomy unity vs. multiplicity. ‘The people’, at least in the sense attributed by Laclau and Mouffe, entails a plurality which is articulated through a chain of equivalence against a common enemy. Hardt and Negri reject this operation because they consider it to be transcendent, but the fact is that it does not necessarily reduce ‘the people’ to unity. Indeed, taking seriously the idea of geographical scale, it is difficult not to recognize the importance of the national space. It is true that reclaiming national sovereignty is a symptom more of its crisis and the impossibility of recovering it. In any case, it would be a mistake to reduce popular sovereignty to national sovereignty and to equalize the unity of ‘the people’ as a result of sovereignty with the claim of ‘the people’ to reshape sovereignty based on the conflict between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’. The capacity of sovereignty to produce identities through the divide inside/outside should not be ignored but neither compared with the attempt to question the existing representative democracies through the elite/people divide (already in social movements’ articulations like the one between the 99% vs. the 1%).

In short, rather than saying that a populist reading of *Empire* can contribute to developing the concept of transnational populism, I would claim that it would be useful to elaborate a conceptualization of multi-scalar

populism where social and political struggles take place at the urban (or local), national and transnational levels and, although difficult, can maintain their autonomy and be connected. The urban experiences (from movements but also from municipalism), the national popular movements (particularly, left-wing parties) and the transnational experiments (still quite shy and incipient like DiEM25 or Plan B) portray a complex picture of the struggles within globalization or Empire. The shift to passages like governance (the combination of movements and parties and interdependence) can be useful as well as the intersectionality nature of 'the people' (and the multitude).

### ***Intersectional***

When revisiting *Empire* 20 years later, Hardt and Negri revisit their concept of multitude. They insist on their interest in how a multiplicity can act politically and not in how only 'the one' can decide, so their rejection of a unified political subject (a centralized leadership council, an electoral party or 'a people') remains the same. However, what I find interesting is how they redefine multitude which has been a quite ambivalent concept with limited impact in its use politically. Hardt and Negri propose, indeed, a redefinition of class based on the formula C-M-C', class-multitude-class prime. The idea is to understand class in terms of multiplicity and not an internally unified subject. To

conceptualize class as multitude, Hardt and Negri deploy intersectionality as a political theory of multiplicity to acknowledge that no one structure of domination is primary to the others, and that subjectivity is there as a multiplicity of subjectivities (in the same way that there is multiplicity of structures of domination). The key here is precarity which can be related to the working class, as labor precarity, and to intersectionality, as precarious life where increasing insecurity affects a wide range of subordinated groups. Hardt and Negri show their understanding of the sense of loss, particularly by trade unions and working-class parties, but they believe that the shift from class to multitude is the only way to have a consistent and sustainable project of class politics, defined by being feminist, antiracist and queer too. The interesting move is the suggestion to return to the concept of class to explore the potential of a multitude and its political action. The return to class from multitude would imply to move "from a unified political conception based on a single axis of domination, that determined by capital, to a multiplicity, which also engages patriarchy, white supremacy and other axes" (2020: 87). Class revisited through multitude (or class prime) is not a socio-economic category but has larger implications: 1) it grasps the effects of subjection created by different relations of domination, not only those provoked by capital; 2) it is a political call, not a descriptive claim, to struggle together



as a class; 3) the recognition of a plurality of dominated classes is not enough, and an internal articulation of these different subjectivities in struggle is necessary. The problem highlighted by Hardt and Negri is that this articulation can easily rely on external bonds of solidarity (back to the issue of transcendence) instead of what is really necessary: internal bonds of solidarity, meaning a mode of articulation which goes beyond standard conceptions of coalition.

The challenge for this redefinition of class is to maintain multiplicity and avoid the reduction to sameness. The concept of multitudinous or intersectional class is offered as alternative to a coalition: “a notion of class that is not only composed of a multiplicity, and grounded in forms of social cooperation and the common, but also articulated by *internal* bonds of solidarity and intersection among struggles, each recognizing that the others are ‘a chapter of their own social and political history’” (2020: 91). The resulting notion of class (class prime) is internally articulated, preserves multiplicity and is equally oriented to diverse struggles (against capital, patriarchy, white supremacy and other types of domination). This mode of articulation or assembly can be seen as recovering the centrality of class but renewed in a context of multiple dominations, not reducible to the relation between labor and capital. Besides offering a more convincing conception of multitude as intersectional class, Hardt and Negri

come quite close to the core of populism and the articulation of ‘the people’. They claim that the movement from class or the people to multitude is not a political mandate but an accomplished fact which has manifested itself over the past twenty years. Populist theory would say something similar but applied to the movement from class to the people. But interestingly enough, Hardt and Negri renew the concept of class but not the one of the people, although they could also do that. If ‘the people’ moved to multitude, is it not possible to imagine a renewed comeback for ‘the people’ (the people prime) after multitude, a form of intersectional people? The focus on the internal bonds and the multiplicity of ‘enemies’ highlights the contrast to populist theory. Nonetheless, Hardt and Negri’s definition of intersectional class sounds quite similar to the logics of difference and equivalence and the articulation of ‘the people’, although through a constitutive outside. The suggestion to preserve plurality and avoid unity (especially in the form of leader) as well as to address different types of domination (from economic inequality to climate change) is a promising way to expand the populist project through an intersectional perspective.

All in all I believe that, beyond the differences, an open dialogue between *operaismo* (in the version of Hardt and Negri) and left-populist theory can be a good starting point to undo fixed dichotomies (representation vs. participation, organization vs

articulation, national vs. global) and move to a space of hybridity. This hybridity is a transition to something else that is difficult to define now. What is clear is that Empire (the global system of production and reproduction and of global governance) entails a huge challenge concerning how to combat efficiently against (and within). The only option so far is to imagine how to re-scale the struggles (local, national and transnational), but imagination and creativity are much needed to materialize it as an alternative to globalization from above where the political subject ('the people', multitude, class) is capable of articulating multiplicity of struggles and claims in an international manner.

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**Tabela 1**

	Operaismo (Hardt and Negri)	(Left-wing) Populism
Subject	Multitude	The People
Sovereign framework	Imperial sovereignty	Modern sovereignty
Ultimate goal	Non-sovereign	Popular sovereignty
Organization/articulation	Autonomy	Hegemony
Collectivity	Common (internal solidarity)	People's will (vs. elite)
Form of democracy	Absolute democracy	Representative democracy

## Abstract

In 2000 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri announced a new global paradigm that implied the shift from modern sovereignty to imperial sovereignty. Until now, they have developed a theoretical and political framework to account for the organization of multitude, a counter-Empire from below, to overcome the multiple and decentralized modes of domination characterizing Empire. Since multiplicity and immanence are the main features of the struggles of multitude, Hardt and Negri have rejected the return of the state, representative politics or 'the people' as subject of change. This position has made it difficult to establish a deeper dialogue with other approaches like populism (or left-populism) by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, despite the relevant reflections and implications for populism contained in the work of Hardt and Negri. This article engages in a critical reading of populism from the Empire perspective where special focus is placed on the construction of incompatible dichotomies between globalization vs. the state, multitude vs. 'the people', and non-sovereignty vs. popular sovereignty. After discussing tensions and issues from both Empire and populist theory, the conclusion points to the application of a multi-scalar and intersectional approach to populism in order to enrich its conceptualization and solve some of its contradictions. **Keywords:** Imperial sovereignty; national sovereignty; multitude; the people ; multi-scalar; intersectionality.

## Resumen

En 2000 Michael Hardt y Antonio Negri anunciaron un nuevo paradigma global que implicaba el cambio de la soberanía moderna a la soberanía imperial. Hasta ahora, han desarrollado un marco teórico y político para dar cuenta de la organización de la multitud, un contraimperio desde abajo, para superar los múltiples y descentralizados modos de dominación que caracterizan al Imperio. Dado que la multiplicidad y la immanencia son las principales características de las luchas de la multitud, Hardt y Negri han rechazado el regreso del Estado, la política representativa o "el pueblo" como sujeto de cambio. Esta posición ha dificultado el establecimiento de un diálogo más profundo con otros enfoques como el populismo (o populismo de izquierda) de Ernesto Laclau y Chantal Mouffe, a pesar de las relevantes reflexiones e implicaciones para el populismo contenidas en la obra de Hardt y Negri. Este artículo realiza una lectura crítica del populismo desde la perspectiva del Imperio, donde se pone especial énfasis en la construcción de dicotomías incompatibles entre globalización versus Estado, multitud versus "pueblo" y no soberanía versus soberanía popular. **Palabras clave:** soberanía imperial; soberanía nacional; multitud; el pueblo ; multiescalar; interseccionalidad.